

Mc Pherson, William

Convocation Address

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Dr. William McPherson  
Commencement, June 12, 1939

To the Members of the Graduating Class

As the years have gone by the numbers of students making up our graduating classes have steadily increased so that it has been found necessary to diminish the time given to the various exercises comprising the Commencement program. The Commencement address has suffered its share of this limitation until now it can do only a little more than salute the members of the class, extend to them sincere felicitations and wish them success in the life opening before them.

I am hoping that word "success" may catch your attention. Earning a living, yes, that is excellent; earning an abundant living - very desirable; but I trust not one of this class will think that enough. What shall carry us beyond work and its healthy reaction ~~in~~play into the spirit of service - into the large attainments and outreaches of life? Shall it be as Madame Curie, who together with her husband gave radium to the world, testified, such things as faith, determination, courage to pursue some great research? Shall it be looking upon the wrongs of some part of the world, unable to forget them? Shall it be love and worship with their inspiration, as Dr. Cabot thought? All these will serve towards something that may rightfully be called success - the spirit of adventurous, resolute, unselfish and high minded living - founded always upon hard, clean work.

My special subject today would be called by a chemist a by-product of this kind of success - and it is "the joy and zest of living this kind of a life". I have to remark with some regret that in the present confusion of the world, joy does not seem to be the thing that many young men and women graduates are looking forward to with that eager anticipation I could covet for them. The discouraging aspects and difficulties are in the foreground. Choices are not easily made. What would seem the first best thing, often hard to come by. Such an outlook, if not vigorously and courageously challenged, can easily become that of the pessimist or the defeatist - anticipating failure, haunted by fear, wondering whether the game is worth the candle.

We are inclined to blame these defeated moods upon our temperament or conditions, just as we regard those persons as very fortunate who have some inner faculty for seeing the good, the beautiful, the hopeful and throwing their weight on that side of the boat. These states of mind are to be interpreted by the psychologist and not by the chemist. But there is a good deal we can do about them and it is very helpful to know that joy in life is not something to be sought directly. While courage and clean, honest doing of the things at hand are always best, he who goes forth hunting for joy will never find it. How strange that this should be true! Yet suddenly it wells up in the consciousness of an honest day's work well done; it is in the strength that comes from gaining a victory over some evil within; it is the reward to the student who has solved some

perplexing problem, to the research worker who has pushed the confines of our knowledge a little further out, to the citizen who has contributed in any one of a thousand ways towards our country's wellbeing. The inner lift of the tide is in all these experiences.

Yes, joy is a by-product of all good living and in this it is like much else in our makeup. In a little book entitled "The Reason for Living" the author says: "The best in life comes as a by-product when our attention is directed elsewhere. Growth of all individuals is a by-product. We attend to eating, sleeping and the expenditure of energy and growth is added when we are not giving it a thought. It is always something that we do, then nature fills in gaps and adds results by means that are out of our hands; when one can give his whole strength and attention to some good cause, he finds all the rest of life automatically takes care of itself."

Joy, real joy, is, I believe, inseparably associated with work. The lazy man, the idle one, has never experienced its delights. I am aware of the fact that there are said to be those who regard all work as drudgery, though, of course, they would not be found in University halls. I recall a discussion aroused by the late President Charles W. Elliott some thirty years ago in Panueil Hall upon the "Joy of Work". Many considered it a sort of joke, while others said "President Elliott has never done any real work, and knowing nothing about it, need not be taken seriously." But I am sure President Elliott knew a great deal about very hard work and was entirely right. He said somewhere;

"If a man would attain any joy-giving excellence in his chosen work, he must first himself do much disagreeable labor. No man can master anything without drudgery. Student life has been full of it and real life will continue to be". The glory of a joyous life is that it is not confined to one station. What is true in the University is also true in the workshop and in the humble cottage.

I have no doubt but that most members of the graduating class will agree with all I have said, but the problem uppermost in their minds in common with many others is how to find work to do and how to fit themselves into the changing economic and social conditions. It is at times tempting to look backward to a past where the status quo was comparatively unchanged and transition from college to active life much easier, but who would be interested in living in a world where there was nothing to test the strength of his mind or muscle? Who would care for even Plato's ideal Republic, could it be given to him outright? What does trouble us is a world that seems to have lost its bearings - to which we do not know how to relate ourselves. We are hearing about this upon every printed page, from every radio, and, I am sure, from every Commencement platform. It seems to be a national state of bewilderment and negativeness. I know of no better analysis made of it than that recently offered us by Mr. Walter Lippman. May I condense a little of what he said? "The American people have everything a nation could need - including a long habit of freedom. Yet with their great resources and power and abundance, they are stalled, whereas they should be in action against poverty and stagnation of enterprise - the

crumbling of law and civilized custom in the world all about them. In place of this, their reaction is one of confusion and indecision, saying "no" to everything because they have not learned how and have not nerved themselves to saying "yes", embarrassed by the opportunities they are not using and by the challenge of the high destiny to which they are not responding. It is for the moment as though the continent had raised up something too great for men to deal with rapidly and for lack of vision, of clear purpose, and a confident will, we are falling far short of what the nation has a right to expect of itself.

To whom then shall we look for the clearer purpose and of the disciplined intelligence that must lie behind a confident will? Shall it not be in part at least to the young men and women going out from our Universities. Does not the positive mood belong rightfully to youth? Can they not add to this a sustained courage and faith and cheerfully endure the discipline that prepared for leadership? Is there not such a thing as the consecration of intelligence to search out and make plain the paths of the future. To everyone who will help turn our national life towards a sounder mind, I can promise a deep and satisfactory joy.

It is our custom on each Commencement Day to have the buglers call our graduates to the "work of the world". We who have been present on these occasions must have noticed that oftentimes the sound of the bugles seems faint and far distant. Today I summon them to blow a clarion call, stirring, summoning, commanding.

And now in conclusion, may I say that the University experience has not only awakened your minds and opened vistas for your imagination and inspiration, but wrought also upon the very structure of your character so that in a true sense it will be a part of you forever as you will always be a part of it. And may I express the hope that you are leaving the University with real affection for your Alma Mater - an affection that will bring you back year after year and will ever cause you to take a vital interest in all that is necessary for her advancement. I can assure you that you have her best wishes and that she will always have a kindly interest in your welfare. As for myself, I can express to you no greater hope than that the joyous life I have discussed today may be yours.